

The Black Stone — By George Gibbs

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.

THE Summer the war in Europe breaks out Constance Masterson decides that she cannot marry Alan Jessup because the young millionaire shows no ambition to do something worth while. Jessup plans a trip to East Africa on his yacht to do some big game hunting. He invites as his guest on the voyage Count Conrad von Hengel, a captain in the German army, who says that he has been ordered to East Africa to join his regiment. Von Hengel is also in love with Constance Masterson. The fact that the German is travelling under an assumed name, combined with many things that happen during the voyage makes the captain of the yacht and Jessup's man Dawson suspect that he is a spy. But Jessup refuses to consider the matter any affair of his. At Gibraltar von Hengel brings on board a heavy bundle which Dawson discovers contains what looks like a large piece of coal. When the yacht reaches Alexandria von Hengel disappears with the bundle he has guarded so jealously. Jessup, conscience stricken at last, lays the whole matter before Northby Pasha, head of the British secret service, who tells him that von Hengel has found the famous Black Stone of Mecca, and will use it to incite the fanatical Arab tribes to revolt. Jessup volunteers to do all he can to find von Hengel and gain possession of the Black Stone. In Cairo he meets Constance, now serving in the British Red Cross, and accompanies her to the bazaar quarter during a great religious celebration. There Jessup catches a glimpse of von Hengel in Arab costume, but the latter takes refuge in a mosque from which unbelievers are barred. Daoud, one of Northby Pasha's agents, aids Jessup and Constance to disguise themselves and gain admittance to the mosque.

CHAPTER VII. (Continued) The Mosque of Hasaneyn.

A NUMBER of durweeshes had suddenly risen as though through the stone flagging and were driving the crowd back with sticks until Constance was pressed almost to suffocation, but she struggled valiantly and managed to keep her place by the column as well as to see what was to happen.

Some of the men wore the ordinary urban and dress of Egypt, others the Turkish padded bonnet, still others the high cap shaped like a sugar loaf. A circle formed, they began to perform their gikr, exclaiming over and over again, "Allah! Allah!" and at each exclamation bowing the head and body and taking a step to the right, the whole ring moving slowly around—slowly at first, then more rapidly, while the cries of "Allah!" redoubled in rapidity and vehemence.

One man, springing as the others seemed to have done, from the earth, appeared suddenly in the center of the moving circle and began to whirl, more and more rapidly, his arms extended, his feet flying, until his dress stood straight out from his body like an open umbrella. The durweeshes in the outer circle were now springing to the right instead of stopping and another circle within the outer one was formed, a smaller one, each man placing his hands on the shoulders of those next to him, the bowing and leaping and the cries of "Allah!" being now rapid and furious.

Through her burka Constance breathed with difficulty. The air was like that in a vapor bath, but none of those nearest her, women or men, seemed to be aware of the stifling heat or pressure. There was a suppressed air of excitement and expectation, and underneath the mad commotion of the sikr was the drone of a thousand voices hushed, but poignant with fervor or passion.

Constance gasped for breath, but she felt no weakness. Instead, she seemed born with a new strength to see and understand all that was passing about her. It was the same thing that she had experienced there, before, in the street with Alan, the sense of feeling the heartbeats of those next her (literally indeed, of drinking to the dregs on this night at least, the cup of human life and experience.

She had become a primitive, sharing with the crowd the mad fervor of the dancing men, the belief in the ginn of the ashir, and the gold of the Enchanted Trough. She was of all time. It seemed that she had witnessed all this before in some previous incarnation.

The East was flowing through her veins, making her a part of itself, a mere instinct with the primitive passions of love, hate, fear predominant, obliterating the cool and orderly processes of reasoning.

A diversion now occurred. Some of the durweeshes ceased dancing and sat, each of them playing on a large tar or kind of tambourine without the pieces of tinkling metal, others on kettledrums, and these sounds, beginning slowly in a cadence, increasing rapidly, were something like what she imagined the beating of tom-toms must be. The noises in the throats of the durweeshes were savage, too, and in a moment there was another kind of dance from some newcomers, more wildly abandoned than the other dance, which by contrast seemed almost stately. Each durweesh seemed to be performing the antics of a madman, moving his body up and down, gesticulating wildly, jumping, screaming, each trying to excel the other in a kind of fantastic orgy of buffoonery.

Constance could have laughed, but she dared not, for the passion that underlay this exhibition showed that it was no laughing matter with them. And presently she had a proof of their fervor. One of the men, a dark, spare individual of middle age, who had excelled the others in the extravagance of his performance, rushed toward the center of the ring formed by his brothers beating tars, where there had been placed a sort of chafing-dish of copper filled with red-hot charcoal.

The durweesh leaned forward quickly and in his fingers seized a piece of live charcoal, which he put into his mouth. Then he took another—and another, until his mouth was full. Constance shuddered in horror, but saw him chew these coals, opening his mouth wider every moment. Each time he inhaled the coals appeared almost at white heat, the inside of his mouth glowing like a furnace, and when he exhaled sparks flew in a fountain of fire. In consternation, she saw him actually chew and swallow the coal and then resume his dancing.

Another durweesh ate glass, then suddenly, as though in a frenzy, sprang up to a long rafter of wood, which extended across an arch above the columns of the liwan, and ran along it. When in the middle, above the heads of the crowd, he halted suddenly, bared an arm and, wetting a finger in his mouth, struck his bare arm with it, causing blood to flow. Constance saw this with her own eyes, for he was

less than twenty feet away. And then she saw him with another stroke of the same finger stanch the flowing blood. It was all eyrie, unnatural—diabolical.

The durweesh dropped down, the tars dropped beating, but the mad cries echoed in her ears long after they had ceased, and were merged at last into the thinner music of two faqirs, who were dancing near her to the jangling of a tambourine—megaseeb, or idiots, Mustapha whispered.

Constance leaned against the column bewildered. What did it mean? Was it all over? The crowd was beginning to stream out toward the portals and now pressed her back against the pillar where Mustapha beside her with his great bulk tried to stem the tide. She experienced a sense of disappointment that the end of the performance should come so soon, also a relaxation of nerves and muscles like that one has at the end of an exciting play, when one returns to the lights of Broadway and the commonplace of daily life.

And yet here about her the East still flowed, the dark-skinned mystics who had danced, their lips unstained from their terrible ordeal, old men with the fervor of fanaticism glowing in their eyes, Turks, Persians, whose dark glances flashed at Constance as though to pierce the secrets of her burka and mantle. There were women of all conditions, the wives of dignitaries and fellaheen, making the most of this night of excitement and liberation, their dark eyes, darker even than a nature through their kohl-painted lids, flashing with fire as they peered to left and right, as though still under the spell of some mastering passion.

As the moments passed and the crowd became less dense, Constance grew nervous. What could have happened? Where were Alan and the Effendi? And where von Hengel? And then, suddenly, as though in answer to her question, she saw him in the liwan, behind the row of pillars by which she stood, and near the outer wall of the mosque, talking earnestly to an old man with a gray beard and moving slowly toward the door by which Ali had led them.

She caught Mustapha by the arm. "Sh!"—she whispered. "I have seen him. Yonder! Remain here until they come. I will return."

And scarcely realizing the dangers to which she might be subjected, and moving entirely on impulse, she left the uncertain Mustapha, who began in a protest, and then, realizing that any discussion would make them conspicuous, finished by assenting. To Constance it made no matter whether he assented or not, for whatever happened, having caught sight of Conrad von Hengel, she did not intend to lose him. So, walking with the utmost deliberation, she followed to the door behind the pillars, where she paused a moment, half concealed, to peer into the corridor beyond where the receding shapes of von Hengel and his companion were dimly outlined against the darkness. Then she followed.

What she was to do in case she was questioned she had not planned, for beyond the salutation in which she had been rehearsed she knew no word of Arabic, and while her disguise, she knew, was complete, a difficult situation might arise from which only silence and flight might extricate her. In the meanwhile, she meant to learn all she could without being observed, and moved silently along the dark corridor toward the dimly lighted vestibule into which Ali had first ushered them, her stockinged feet making no sound on the smooth flagging and the darkness here effectively concealing her.

Before she reached the arch at the further end of the passage she paused, for she heard the sound of the voices of the two

men, now deep in conversation and apparently oblivious of all else but the topic discussed. Constance stole forward again and saw them. She could not, of course, understand what they said, but the man with the gray beard halted a moment as though coming to a decision and then led the way to a hanging upon the further side of the vestibule, revealing a small door which he unbolts and then, with a bow, invited the spurious Bedawee to enter.

Constance paused, her heart now beating furiously in indecision and wondering whether to try to follow through the hanging or to retreat to the pillar and the faithful Mustapha, and there await the coming of Alan and the Effendi. But something impelled her forward, and she emerged into the vestibule of the door of the Nazir, and after a quick look about, which showed her that the room was empty, she crossed on tip-toe to the hanging and furtively drew it aside.

The door was not entirely closed, the old mah with the gray beard evidently believing the hanging to be sufficient concealment. Her fingers trembling as she touched it, Constance pushed the door open a few inches wider, until she could get her head through it, at the same time dropping the hanging into place behind her. With this act it seemed that she was committed irrevocably to the task she had set herself.

But he read on steadily until the end, when he said a few words below his breath, and then, half rising, suddenly faced the wall behind him and assumed an attitude of prayer, kneeling, and then bowed his body three times, until his forehead touched the mat, at each prostration muttering a phrase containing the name of Allah. Von Hengel devoutly followed his example, and then they straightened in silence and remained motionless for a moment, Von Hengel waiting as though upon a final decision.

At last the old man signaled the other to rise, and, setting the example, walked quickly across the room toward the archway where Constance was hiding. Were they coming back through the passageway? She did not dare to wait and fled hurriedly by the way she had come to the further door, slipping through, but remaining a moment concealed from the vestibule by the outer curtain. A moment of uncertainty. Behind her Von Hengel and the old man were standing near the door, as though finishing their conversation, preparatory to following her. And outside the hanging in the vestibule she distinctly heard, quite near her, the sounds of other voices.

Her courage faltered. It was clear that the part of the mosque which she had entered was sacred ground—at least sacro

"T—sh, All Affal. It is justifiable. It is he yonder who with lies seeks to violate the law—to mislead."

"But no debt to Northby Pasha is worth the value of my soul, my welfare and my hooreyehs in Paradise," he wailed.

"Be quiet, then," Daoud commanded.

"Go thou—with us."

"No, master."

"And you, Mustapha," he said, turning to the dragoman.

"Ameen. I, too, master," he gasped; "the sanctuary! The tomb of Hoseyn! I, too, will be gone to wait yonder—outside. But as Allah is my witness, I have served Northby Pasha faithfully."

"Go, then," commanded Daoud, "both of you. But as you value your lives keep silence." He followed them with his glance to the door and saw them silently depart. "Dogs," he muttered, "let them go. We can better attend to this business alone."

And then to Constance, "What made you think the men inside were about to follow you?"

"They merely moved across the room. I was afraid they would see me. But they cannot have gone far. It was but a few moments ago."

But Alan had turned to the hanging and was lifting its edge. "Come, Effendi—we've waited long enough."

Daoud nodded. "But Madame had best remain."

"No, no," whispered Constance. "I can't. I am frightened here. I will follow."

Daoud showed his white teeth in a smile and shrugged with a fatalistic air.

"As it pleases you," he added, "but I would advise you to keep to the rear."

He followed Alan through the hanging and into the dark hallway beyond. Their shoeless feet made no sounds upon the flagging and they reached the archway at the further end where the American paused and peered through the curtain. Silence within the apartment. One of Jessup's hands moved under his burnus, while the other quickly thrust aside the hanging as he put his head and shoulders through the opening, and then after a pause softly entered, the Effendi just behind him.

The room was empty save for the deewan, the lamp, the two mats and the table. Daoud noiselessly moved around the room, his quick glances searching its darkest corners. "The room of the Nazir," he muttered. "They have gone on to the Kkoobeh, which is beyond. There must be another entrance here somewhere."

But Jessup had already found it behind another hanging in the opposite corner and was standing, with warning hand outstretched, listening. The Effendi came forward quickly, and they silently lifted the curtain, while Constance, more alarmed than ever for Alan's safety as well as for her own, followed them into the darkness beyond.

There was a pallid glow at the end of this corridor which, as they neared it, showed a lofty room or rotunda. The Effendi, his fingers on Jessup's arm, went slowly forward until they came to the end of the shadow of the arch, where they halted and listened.

Constance could see beyond them an oblong shape covered with an embroidery of silk and surrounded by a kind of circular screen meant to keep the holy of holies sacred from the touch of heedless fingers. And in the dim light from a lantern above, which cast a cool, greenish radiance over the monument and the white walls of the tomb, she had to admit that the sepulchre was impressive.

But suddenly Daoud raised his hand in token of warning, and they heard voices speaking, voices which echoed with hollow resonance against the vaulted roof high overhead. The tones of one voice were solemnly intoned as though in the performance of a rite, and the voice which answered the first was Conrad von Hengel's. There were other voices, but mere murmurs of two other men, perhaps three.

The Effendi was listening intently, but, of course, Alan and Constance understood nothing of what was said. They watched the eager face of their companion, sure that what was happening upon the other side of the screen was the very thing they had come to prevent. The Nazir knew the secret of the Mosque of Hasaneyn—the real history of the Kaba Stone; and documents which had been brought to him were confirmation of it. Nothing else could account for the air of excitement in the Effendi.

Alan ventured a whisper, "Is it?"

But Daoud silenced him with a quick gesture, nodding at the same time.

More solemnly intoning, "Alla hoo Akbar," "God is most great." There is no God but God," in which all of the voices joined. And then Conrad von Hengel's deep tones, speaking calmly while the others listened, breaking in from time to time in deep emotion, with fragments of rekahs and prayers. At last von Hengel paused again as though to give importance to his utterance and solemnly spoke a phrase.

Alan, who had been reading the Effendi's face eagerly, saw him move slightly forward. He gestured to Constance to go back down the corridor and crept quickly forward behind Daoud along the screen. The moment was tense with possibilities. But if Alan had thought the Effendi had planned to take control of the situation after the manner of a New York policeman, he was to be disappointed, for Daoud chose the much more subtle and Oriental way. He rose to his full height, Alan following his example, and then recited

the Fathhah or opening verse of the Koran, and followed it in an air of wrapt devotion with the prayer to Hoseyn and Abou So ood, the King of saints.

The men kneeling upon the floor paused in their devotions to look up at him, the faces of the two bearded imams placid and unchangeable, that of the Nazir frowningly curious, while von Hengel turned, showing a brief flash of fury at the interruption. And the cause of his discomfiture was not far to seek, for upon the flagging between the four men, on a white mat, was a darkish piece of rock about the size of a man's two fists.

Alan was already fingering the automatic beneath his robes, but the Effendi spoke on calmly in Arabic, addressing all of his remarks to the man with the gray beard, who nodded once or twice, and then prostrated himself again. In the meanwhile Alan felt von Hengel's frowning gaze searching his features keenly, saw him bend forward and quickly seize the Black Stone and put it under his gown, rising quickly and retreating toward the other side of the screen, as Alan sprang past the Effendi and over the very head of the surprised Nazir.

"Drop it, Conrad," he cried in English. "The jig is up," and levelled his weapon at his quondam guest.

"Jessup!" The cry was wrenched from the German's throat in sheer amazement. But he managed to control his features and in reply bowed his head solemnly. But Daoud, who had rushed around the screen from the opposite direction, ran toward him.

Von Hengel's burnus seemed suddenly to stream fire and the solemn arches of the vault resounded with a deafening detonation. Alan brought his automatic up in line with von Hengel's breast, when something heavy struck him, felling him to the flagging. He struggled upward a moment to look into the fanatical eyes of one of the imams and then sank to the floor, unconscious.

CHAPTER VIII.

Northby Pasha Takes a Hand.

NORTHBY PASHA was through. All the intricacies of this ingenious problem had been tried out by means of familiar equations, and between the hour of the first report from Alexandria until the departure of Mr. Jessup from the Governorat he had formulated a plan more or less definite to entrap Captain Conrad von Hengel.

This consisted in part in watching the railroad stations, the main roads and the placing of a large part of the force of his available men into the native quarter of the town. The documents in the Mosque of Hasaneyn were, of course, to play a part in von Hengel's plan to have the Black Stone acknowledged here in Cairo as the original Kaba Stone of Mecca. With this accomplished and a number of followers obtained among the wardens of the mosques of the city, anything—even a new Nationalist revolt in Egypt—might be accomplished.

But Northby Pasha had not rounded upon the extraordinary rapidity of von Hengel's movements. He had not thought that the German could have gotten into the city before he had laid his snares to catch him. And even given that hypothesis, the Hasaneyn was the most carefully guarded mosque in Cairo, its warden most jealous of its traditions and sacred character. Unless in some manner von Hengel could have already gotten into communication with Abd El-Rahmaan, it would be some days before the German officer could reach the Nazir and by that time all the ramifications of the Intelligence Bureau would be upon the watch to nip the plot in the bud and to catch red-handed the arch conspirator and take his precious emblem.

Northby Pasha had already been prepared for Alan Jessup. The American was a colorless person with more money than brains, and in this crisis, somewhat alarmed at the damage his careless hospitality may have done, had run for cover and immunity. But the interview with Jessup had somewhat changed the officer's point of view.

When he had first come into the Governorat he seemed quite supine and more than half asleep. But as the interview had proceeded Mr. Jessup had seemed to show a livelier interest in the revelations of the Intelligence officer. And his show of contrition and his desire to atone for a dangerous situation largely of his own making, if not entirely genuine, were admirably dissembled.

It was with an object that he had taken Alan Jessup so completely into his confidence. If the man were sincere his presence in Cairo was essential to the capture of von Hengel, for no other person, except an American girl Jessup mentioned, could identify the man. And if, as Northby Pasha more than half suspected, Mr. Jessup were less stupid than he appeared, he could be made useful. But if, under Mr. Jessup's leisurely guise, there was some motive which had not yet appeared, the full confidences of their interview would soon make the police officer aware of it.

At any rate, he was a stranger in Cairo and until tried out in Northby Pasha's alchemic was an object of suspicion, and so, following his usual custom in leaving nothing to chance he had detailed several of his best men to follow Mr. Jessup to Shepherd's hotel, with instructions to keep him in sight until the hour of an appointed interview upon the morrow.

Thus it was that the arrival of Daoud's assistant, Osman Khalil, late that night, out of breath with running, caused some commotion at the Governorat and resulted in an audience with Northby Pasha, who in amazement—and some inward compunctions as to his own belated part in the affair—listened to what the messenger had to say as to Mr. Jessup's extraordinary attack upon the door of the Nazir and the explanation of it.

Now fully aware of the importance of the message, Northby Pasha questioned

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"She saw von Hengel take from beneath his robes a piece of parchment and hand it to the old man who began reading it, with sober mien."

With greater assurance now she pushed the door until it was opened wide enough to admit her body, and eagerly peered into the darkness. Another passageway, shorter and narrower than the other, and at its end an opening with a hanging revealing another apartment, with a glimpse of a deewan and lights.

She waited and listened to the sound of the voices which was now renewed, it seemed, in greater freedom of utterance. Then she moved forward a few paces and reached a spot where, hidden by the hanging, she could peer through the slit at the edge of the archway at the two figures now squatting upon mats by a small table upon which was a lamp and papers.

She saw von Hengel take from beneath his robes a piece of parchment which he handed to the other to read, and the old man took it with a sober mien and began reading it. Von Hengel sat silent, watching him.

She did not dare breathe. It seemed as though the very beating of her heart must penetrate the silence of this solemn conclave.

Behind her somewhere was the murmur of the crowd, of tambourines and cymbals playing, but distant, like the drone of insects' wings, and by their detachment only serving to make the silence of the room of mystery more profound. Once the parchment in the hands of the old man crackled harshly and the sound of it startled her.